

OUR FUTURE GROWN IN AFRICA?

Agriculture in the African Union

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ABSTRACT: ²

In the context of the current celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Organization of African Unity, now the African Union (OAU/AU), much is anticipated for Africa's impending development. This paper questions the location of agriculture within the tenure of the OAU/AU over the past fifty years. By tracing agriculture over the past five decades, this paper offers a future perspective on agriculture within the so-called African Renaissance and advocates for Africa's small scale farmer citing the Zimbabwean case study for further debate.

“Our future made in Africa”, the theme of the May 2013 issue of New African magazine was a striking declaration resounding with the current optimism surrounding Africa's future development. This in the background of a receding Western economy, as was the case during South America's industrialisation, seems to have given Africa a new lease on life. Growth-wise, Africa is currently outperforming the West and one certainly receives a much better return on investment in Africa by comparison. The issue further outlined a special on the OAU/AU golden jubilee, but in all this celebration in over 170 pages I realised that oddly enough there was only a single (two-page) contribution¹ on the AU and Agriculture. This I found odd since, as we recall, one of the founding issues informing most independence movements, especially in those states that went to war, was land and agriculture. Nowhere in the colonial experience was the reality more vivid than in the lack of access to land and jobs. For the ‘peasant masses’, who supported these movements, political independence was synonymous to farming, land ownership – agriculture. It's well known that for some states, even self determination was a secondary concern, but land ownership and agriculture were a common denominator throughout the African independence movement and no liberating party ignored that fact, even if merely rhetorically. With this I began to wonder what happened to agriculture over the 50 year tenure of

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² This paper results from a closed call for submissions as part of [Pambazuka News Special Issue](#) for the celebration and reflection on 50 years of the African Union (OAU/AU).

the OAU/AU, but perhaps more critically, where will it go in the next 50 years? So I have outlined some of my thoughts and wonderings on the matter.

At its formation in 1963, the OAU was an alliance of 32 independent states and its basic concern was for sovereignty and African Unity under the Pan-African philosophy. Therefore it primarily engaged with reclaiming “Africaness” on the world stage; while instrumental in other liberation movement(s), it was less vocal on agriculture, to be fair, equally so, on other specific sectors as well. I believe this was partly due to the assumption that “with independence, all else would follow”, and also due to its principle of non interference in sovereign states; this left African agriculture as a state based practice. There are various agri-policy examples such as Tanzania’s “Kilimo Kwanza” (farming first) and in Zimbabwe, Joshua Nkomo is most famously remembered for saying “if you want money (*mali*) you should farm (*lima*)” – and all states have experimented internally to some degree. While agriculture was generally acknowledged by the OAU, it appears that not much *could* be done about it and no more acutely was it felt than at the 20th OAU summit of 1985 when “delegates arrived...[in Addis Ababa]... at an airport full of relief planes for the starving”ⁱⁱ. The article goes on to outline that “Nyerere was so moved by Ethiopia’s suffering that he gave a large cheque for relief work...[although]... Tanzania was a pauper too”.

The above was in the context of Structural Adjustment Programs set in place from the late 1970s and national spending on agriculture plummeted as food aid became a common sight. Interestingly, in an FAO policy briefⁱⁱⁱ, it outlined to my shock and surprise, that agriculture performed better in the period after structural adjustments (by 1% in fact). When I calmly considered this, it occurred that it might be true due to the external investment in agriculture brought about by privatisation. In comparison, at the same summit of 1985, regime security was one of the biggest concern for many African states and the spectre of coup d’état was a popular rhetoric. This is ironic because at the time about 28% of Africa’s population died from hunger and malnourishment, which incidentally, kills more people than a military conflict, worse so because it is less ‘glamorous’ and is easily ignored. In a Food Security conference held in Leeds 2011, an outline was published converting the statistics and showed that the number of people dying from hunger in Africa is comparable to 50 jumbo jets falling out of the sky; Every day. The same FAO policy brief continued to highlight that perhaps a closer look is required to understand *who* benefited from this growth (an important point I wish to return to). In Zimbabwe for example, we saw the distribution of yellow maize for the first time. It was aptly named “*iskundamoya*”, a made up word referring to extreme poverty which forced people to resort to what was thought to be animal feed. To this day it is still considered the sure sign of acute poverty, in fact, at the time some families ate this maize meal in hiding for fear of shame. Even in this time, not much public declarations were forthcoming from the OAU about Africa’s agriculture and some have said it was simply unworkable in those days, as many member states were unable to even pay their membership fees late alone joint programs of any kind; and that the “failures are not the faults of the organisation; rather, they are the result of asking the OAU to do more than it conceivably could”^{iv}.

Leading into the 90’s, various ideological disagreements in the OAU and its inability to intervene in sovereign states such as Idi Amin’s Uganda and the Rwanda Genocide sparked criticism from the international community, part of a combination of events that led to the Sirte Declaration of

1999 which ushered the formation of the AU in 2002. It was a year later that Agriculture found its way more prominently to the Union's policies in the form of the Maputo Declaration 7(II) of 2003, on *Agriculture and Food Security in Africa*. The main outcome was the formation of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP), in which the AU plays a key role in its policy formulation and harmonisation, in partnership with NEPAD as its technical arm. CAADP was set up in response to the first Millennium Development Goal; it was declared that 30 % of Africa's population is malnourished and that Africa is a net food importer. It aimed to develop special policies and strategies targeted at small scale and traditional farmers in rural areas and to allocate at least 10% of national budget(s) to agriculture within 5 years. A decade later, reports show that only 20% of African states have managed this budgetary undertaking. As an evaluation mechanism, finance alone is not enough but direct causal evidence of CAADP's effect on the ground are equally difficult to observe. Nonetheless, the joint agriculture program in partnership with the regional economic communities like ECOWAS and COMESA, is certainly a step in the right direction.

Coming back to my initial question, where to for Africa's agriculture? According to the brief evaluation above, it appears that agriculture remains primarily a national practice despite the recent efforts by the AU. The implementation of the multi donor funded CAADP faces many challenges and perhaps a decade is too short to measure a continental effort in comparison to a national policy. This is to be expected because 'Africa is not a country' and one has to consider the unique context(s) in every state which vary greatly even within each state. While this remains true, in this global age of 'trading blocks' it would be difficult and highly inconceivable for Africa to compete on the global market as uncoordinated nation states. Even though Africa has competitive advantages like the largest agricultural green fields and the youngest population in the world which will peak in the coming 20/30 years; in comparison, it's population of 1,10 billion is far less compared to a single state like China's 1,35^v billion, at almost a tenth of Africa's territory. So Africa's low density and dispersed population require a far greater investment upfront on infrastructure in comparison to other territories with the exception of Russia. Clearly a collective agricultural program is a central concern yet there is not a very 'audible' direction from the AU regarding its implementations. The loudest voice on Africa's welfare seems to always come from outside and the AU has to start competing *audibly* with this discourse and on this matter, agriculture is just one example.

Searching the web for the AU's position on agriculture, I had far more results from NGOs, 'cooperation' agencies and other 'friends of Africa' than from the AU itself. What concerned me was that, like facebook, some of these 'friends' don't have noble intentions and are in fact behind the 'new scramble for Africa', referring to what has been called the most severe land acquisition since colonialism. These recent farmland grabs, made popular by cases such as Madagascar's Daewoo land deal which was fortunately protested ending in the removal of President Marc Ravalomanana in 2009. In the media it was cited as but one case of "over-developed, over-populated, land and water scarce Asian and Middle Eastern nations embarking upon global land grabs eerily reminiscent of past Western colonial practices"^{vi}. It is interesting to note that it is mostly Western Europe that has come out defending the 'rights of the native land', implying that the East is doing by soft power, what the West did by the gun. While not too much is known about these highly secretive deals, the 'land grabbers' seem to all act almost in unison under the

rubric of Africa's food security which effectively masks the acquisition of African farmland. This practice was accelerated when the world was spooked into action by the 2008 financial and food crises, also believed to have led to the Arab Spring as they were vulnerably dependent on food imports. In light of all this, the AU's proverbial deafening silence regarding these occurrences, less so with regards to a unified agriculture policy or position, leaves Africa very porous. In other words, if Africa does not make a clear and audible plan for itself, there are always others willing to make it 'for Africa' and once these land deals become "facts on the ground" I fear that despite our enthusiasm, this will be the future of Africa's Agriculture. Like FAO's projected 1% growth during Structural Adjustment Programmes, Africa might experience yet another kind of 'adjustment' if these silent conditions persist.

In stunning contrast to this situation, one of the most *audible* agrarian events coming out of Africa recently was Zimbabwe's land redistribution of 2000; in a time when many African states are losing theirs, "Zimbabwe takes back its land"^{vii}. Though the media painted it as a disorganised, savage and bloodied affair, having visited some of the resettlements myself I am convinced otherwise. Various other independent publications have confirmed the success of the program and over the past decade, small scale farmers have begun to recapitalise and are proving to be fairly productive. Considering that on average, 70% of Africa's population is rural could Zimbabwe's land redistribution be a radical but workable example? In light of such a precedent, and the evolution of Africa's agriculture, perhaps it is more appropriate instead to ask – Where do we start in formulating what works in a truly African Agriculture? It was brought to my attention that some departments at the AU, though prominent on paper, are in reality a small office manned by three individuals who were initially hired for a very different job. The question of capacity cannot be overstated, as it is said, '*development is reports*', this is why organisations such as NGO's and FAO 'speak louder' on African matters because they have teams whose job is to produce these perceptions which, unfortunately and invariably influence who invests where and how.

The reality is that Africa's small scale farmer can produce competitively, as a starting point perhaps equipping these farmers with techniques like Conservation Agriculture (CA), which requires little overheads, less inputs and has high output without damaging the land – it's only drawback is its intensive labour. In my own work at The Global Native^{viii}, a small organisation working on agriculture in Zimbabwe, we have encountered the hard evidence of the productive capacity of CA. Developed in Zimbabwe it is currently practised in most of Africa and promoted by international organisations such as FAO and recently the AU. I believe it is in the encounter of the small scale farmer as hard evidence and the supportive audibility of an umbrella like the AU that will bring tangible change in Africa's agriculture. In our experience, small scale farmers are far more capable than we expect, like anyone else, they behave logically and when a 'market opportunity' is made available to them, their response(s) have been impressive. There is time yet for a golden future grown in Africa and in light of this golden jubilee, the AU has certainly taken up the gauntlet yet its continued silence in the everyday life of the African farmer remains one of its biggest challenges. In fact, I myself, working in agriculture, have had to take great pains to literally 'dig up' what the AU thinks and does regarding such a critical aspect of Africa's development, what more those on the ground and others like you and me?

ⁱ Guest column by Dr. A. Namanga Ngongi in New African, May 2013 No.528

ⁱⁱ OAU A year of sombre realism, by Richard Hall in New African, May 2013 No.528

ⁱⁱⁱ FAO, Building a case for more public support, Policy brief 1 http://www.fao.org/tc/tca/workshop2005_eng.asp

^{iv} OAU, not as bad as people think, by Guy Arnold in New African, May 2013 No.528

^v http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/world_population.htm

^{vi} <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/5661>

^{vii} Zimbabwe Takes Back its Land, a book by Joseph Hanlon, Jeannette Manjengwa and Teresa Smart

^{viii} www.theglobalnative.org.uk